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The Beauty
of Sprawl



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Benjamin Tibbetts, Tradd Horne, Tyler Horne, and Megan Eustace frolic in the Horne family yard on James Island.

PHOTO/WADE SPEES



ALL IN A ROW. *New Urbanists call for tighter housing patterns, as shown in the Westbury Park neighborhood in Beaufort County.* PHOTO/WADE SPEES



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The Beauty of Sprawl

By John H. Tibbetts

If New Urbanists got their way, sprawling suburbs would become an endangered species. But the public, so far, isn't going along.

They come to bury sprawl, not to praise it. Newspaper editorials attack sprawl as ugly and expensive, and political leaders announce they want to stop its spread. Innovative town planners condemn sprawl—low-density, car-dependent development—as socially destructive. It eats up wildlife habitat, harms air and water quality, and destroys farmland and other open space, according to environmentalists. Commuters complain bitterly about ever-growing traffic on former rural roads. And civil-rights leaders argue that increasing public investments in far-flung suburban areas sucks the economic life out of central cities.

Yet many ordinary Americans actually do praise sprawl by flocking to new subdivisions along metropolitan edges. “Suburbanization is now almost universal,” says Peter Gordon, who teaches real-estate development at the University of Southern California. “It is hard to avoid the idea that sprawl reflects choices that real people are making.”

When Americans talk about “sprawl,” they usually mean traffic jams, loss of green areas, monotonous strip malls. Still, this term also has to connote the pleasant residential neighborhoods where they enjoy living. “The landscape of suburban sprawl . . . provides many people with the privacy and the individual plots of land that they crave,” acknowledged architecture critic Paul Goldberger in a recent issue of the *New Yorker* magazine.

Surveys show that the single-family home with a yard is the most sought-after form of housing. Many homebuyers look for large lots and mature trees as privacy buffers, preferring houses on winding streets ending in cul-de-sacs that discourage noisy drive-through traffic. Because most homeowners demand stability for their investments, they fiercely support local ordinances keeping convenience stores and other businesses out of their neighborhoods. Large lots, cul-de-sacs, winding streets, and segregated land uses are basic ingredients of many popular, stable neighbor-

hoods with high property values. But these are also some basic ingredients of sprawl, according to proponents of New Urbanism.

About a decade ago, cheered on by environmentalists, a group of architects and urban planners founded the Congress for the New Urbanism, calling for an alternative community model. Today, there are dozens of New Urbanist—or “neotraditionalist”—neighborhoods underway around the country, including several in South Carolina, such as the I’On neighborhood in Mt. Pleasant, the Daniel Island community near Charleston, and Newpoint in Beaufort County. Well-known New Urbanist communities include the resort village Seaside, Florida, and the town of Celebration, Florida (pop. 2,700), developed by the Disney Corporation.

Many New Urbanists and their allies call for construction of higher-density neighborhoods with single-family homes on smaller lots, townhouses, apartments, and condominiums. “There need to be judgments about where to focus growth,” says Sam Passmore, director of land use programs at the S.C. Coastal Conservation League. “Communities need to concentrate development instead of uniformly dispersing homes across the landscape. In the places where you’ll have development, you should have higher density.”

New Urbanist developers and architects are nostalgic for the New England villages, small Southern cities, and elegant “railroad suburbs” of the early 1900s. In those days, people lived closer together and walked or rode public transit to work. If New Urbanists could build their ideal community, they would design it with these century-old models in mind, providing wider access to mass transit, while placing grocery stores, restaurants, parks, offices, and light industries within

walking distance of homes. In this New Urbanist ideal, residents would be much less car-dependent. In contrast, most of the modern urban landscape is devoted to accommodating cars: vast acres of roads, highways, driveways, parking lots. If you could drastically reduce car trips, then you could shrink the amount of space that vehicles require, making the overall urban acreage smaller, and that could go a long way toward controlling sprawl.

But do Americans really want New Urbanism? While innovative planners and architects despise the modern suburb, people who live there apparently like it. Ninety-one percent of suburban residents give their communities positive ratings, according to a February 2000 Pew Center for Civic Journalism survey. Forty-three percent of suburbanites describe their communities as “excellent.” Why? Because many sprawling areas have attractive, affordable housing, good schools, parks, recreational facilities, and shopping centers.

Many suburbanites complain that developers exacerbate sprawl by building new subdivisions farther out on town edges, drawing thousands of newcomers who crowd roads and schools. But the real motivation of such whiners—unofficial members of a growing NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) crusade—is to keep out newcomers, preventing the young and less fortunate from sharing the old-timers’ suburban pleasures, according to Charles E. Fraser, the developer of Sea Pines Plantation and other neighborhoods on Hilton Head Island. “In the heart of every homebuyer there lurks a greedy NIMBY.”

Whatever their motivation, some voters are turning against new subdivisions and strip malls. One of suburbanites’ greatest concerns is “overdevelopment,” according to the Pew survey. Twelve states have adopted growth-management plans,

and seven other states have proposed major land purchases to limit development into open spaces. New Jersey, for example, has issued bonds to raise \$1 billion for green-area protection over the next 10 years. Portland, Oregon, instituted the toughest anti-sprawl plan with a conservation zoning measure named an “urban growth boundary.” Regional officials since 1979 have drastically slowed development outside of an area that covers 24 municipalities and three counties.

Maryland has begun a so-called “Smart Growth” plan that limits financing of roads and other infrastructure beyond metro edges and encourages development in already-settled communities. Now Pennsylvania and other states are imitating the smart-growth concept. Last year, South Carolina legislators began talking about the need for smart-growth planning here. With 108,000 acres a year converted from open space to development, South Carolina ranks 11th nationally in green-space losses, a high ranking for a small state.

The Lowcountry has grown faster than any other region of South Carolina over the past 30 years, according to Mike MacFarlane, a demographer with the S.C. State Budget and Control Board. But as coastal counties fill up, development is spreading inland. Explosive development along the coastal plain probably will soon reach the Santee lakes—Lake Moultrie and Lake Marion—according to Pat Mason, co-founder of the Center for Carolina Living, a marketing and research enterprise. “Lake living is the next alternative” for “equity retirees,” who are already leaving the immediate coast and buying less expensive homes farther inland, Mason says. Developers are purchasing land along the Santee lakes, which stretch from Berkeley County for 60 miles into the state’s heart.



GREEN ACRES. Charles Fraser stands before a home in Sea Pines Plantation, which he developed on Hilton Head Island starting in the late 1950s. Fraser pioneered practices such as saving vegetation and tree canopies on large private lots. A generation ago, Fraser's developments were considered environmentally friendly. But Fraser's ideas have fallen out of favor among New Urbanists and many conservationists who argue for construction of higher-density neighborhoods. PHOTO/WADE SPEES



Southern boom

So you think South Carolina is getting crowded? Better get used to it. The United States and particularly the South are in the midst of a long-term, steady climb in population.

Since World War II, the nation's biggest population increase in a single decade was in the 1950s, when the U.S. population grew by nearly 28 million. In the 1980s, the increase was nearly as large—27 million people. The 2000 census will likely show a population around 280 million; if so, the census would set a new record of around 30 million for one-decade growth. About one-third of this growth—one million new American citizens a year—is due to immigration.

Americans are increasingly headed south. In the 1990s, nearly 2.5 million people moved from another U.S. region to the Southern states along the Atlantic coast—Maryland to Florida—the largest in-migration of any region in the nation. Most arrive from the Northeast, where they've been accustomed to sophisticated government services, such as higher-quality schools, recreational facilities, and health care. Now they're demanding better services in South Carolina, as well.

"We anticipate a sea change ahead," says Pat Mason, co-founder of the Center for Carolina Living, a marketing and research enterprise. "Newcomers will continue to be more urban and expect more services. Many of the migrants are used to high-density living, and it's likely that developers will respond to this market and provide more dense, neotraditional developments. A 'stacked-up-living' market could become more in demand."

And snowbirds keep flocking south.

Each year, about 50,000 more people move to South Carolina than leave it. Most of these newcomers hail from the Northeast. By 2010, the front edge of a massive demographic bulge—the first baby boomers to reach 65 and receive Social Security benefits—will pour down from New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania to buy retirement or second homes.

If current development patterns hold, what can we expect the coast to look like in 30 years? Pretty much like suburbanized Florida today. The Charleston metropolitan area will likely increase in acreage by 250 percent, spreading inland along I-26 until it jumps over I-95, heading to Orangeburg, according to Robert H. Becker, director of Clemson University's Strom Thurmond Institute of Government & Public Affairs. The Charleston area will probably spread up the coast toward McClellanville and down the coast through Johns and Wadmalaw islands. Similar explosive development will likely continue from the Beaufort and Myrtle Beach areas. Excepting protected lands, the coastal plain eventually could become a megalopolis from the North Carolina border to the Georgia line with a beltway called I-95. "Sprawl," says Becker, "is consuming the landscape."

However, if you don't allow people to spread out, Fraser argues, then your only option is build up—that is, to construct tall apartment buildings for housing. "Since the early 19th century, the country's population has grown so much that if we'd stayed in a nonsprawl condition, we'd all have to live in 30-story buildings today," says Fraser. "When you consider our continuing population growth, where do you house 25 million new Americans every decade?"

Eventually, many experts say, Americans might have two choices: live much closer together or accept spread-out suburbs as the dominant urban form. "People say they don't like sprawl and don't like higher (housing) density," notes Ben Boozer, director of the 1,000 Friends of South Carolina, a community development organization. "Well, you can't have it both ways."

SPRAWL'S ROOTS

Where did modern sprawl come from? Over six decades, from the 1860s to the 1930s, a series of brilliant architects and town planners established elegant models of suburban growth in the United States. During this era, developers built suburbs to provide refuges for the elite to escape conditions in polluted, overcrowded cities. Another group of idealists emerging after World War II built suburbia on an unprecedented scale, helping provide veterans and their families with homes and yards of their own. A third group of idealists built communities while still protecting natural areas and trees, gaining renown for their environmental sensitivity, though later they were attacked for perpetuating sprawl.

Along the South Carolina coast, you can visit the consequences of more than a century of suburban high hopes: hundreds of neighborhoods built around views of salt marshes and golf courses. At their best, these prosperous neighborhoods resemble leafy parks with interspersed houses hidden among the trees—though waggish observers might say these neighborhoods more nearly resemble cemeteries.

Actually, a graveyard became an early inspiration for the American suburban landscape. Although it's hard to imagine now, public green areas were rarities before the Civil War; nearly all large gardens and parks were privately owned. In 1831, the country's first, grand-scale public green space opened—the Mount Auburn Cemetery, near Boston, which featured curving roadways, rolling hills, lakes, and grave sites under groves of trees. Seeking breathing space from city life, visitors flocked to Mount Auburn's romantic landscape, riding horses on paths and picnicking on hillsides.

During the 19th century, the U.S. population grew faster than any other nation in history—and a large portion of this growth ended up in cities. High birth rates among native-born Americans were accompanied by millions of immigrants who flooded into squalid urban centers, where fires, industrial pollution, inadequate sanitation, and infectious diseases were deadly threats.

KNOW YOUR NEIGHBORS. Ward Reynolds, an environmental planner who lives in I'On, a New Urbanist neighborhood in Mt. Pleasant, believes that neotraditional communities can help reduce suburban sprawl. "By developing at higher densities with smaller lots," he says, "you can fit more people into a neighborhood," thereby reducing the need for further development into farmlands and forests on the metropolitan fringe.

PHOTO/WADE SPEES





New county plans

Under South Carolina law, most local governments were to have established comprehensive plans by 1999. With a comprehensive plan, a community establishes a blueprint for development, identifying which areas should be targeted for various land uses, providing a rationale for development standards or zoning, for infrastructure spending, and other requirements for orderly growth.

"The comprehensive plan is the primary tool to manage the future of our communities," says Ben Boozer, director of 1,000 Friends of South Carolina.

Charleston County recently passed a plan that would set density levels in some rural areas at one house for every three to 25 acres, depending on the location. The plan is intended to provide the framework to prevent sprawling development in outlying regions. Moreover, the county plan calls for the purchasing of rural development rights to control sprawl.

But a comprehensive plan is just a broad policy document. Elected officials must also follow up with ordinances that correspond to the plan's guidelines. "Plans are meaningless until they're implemented," says Sam Passmore of the S.C. Coastal Conservation League.

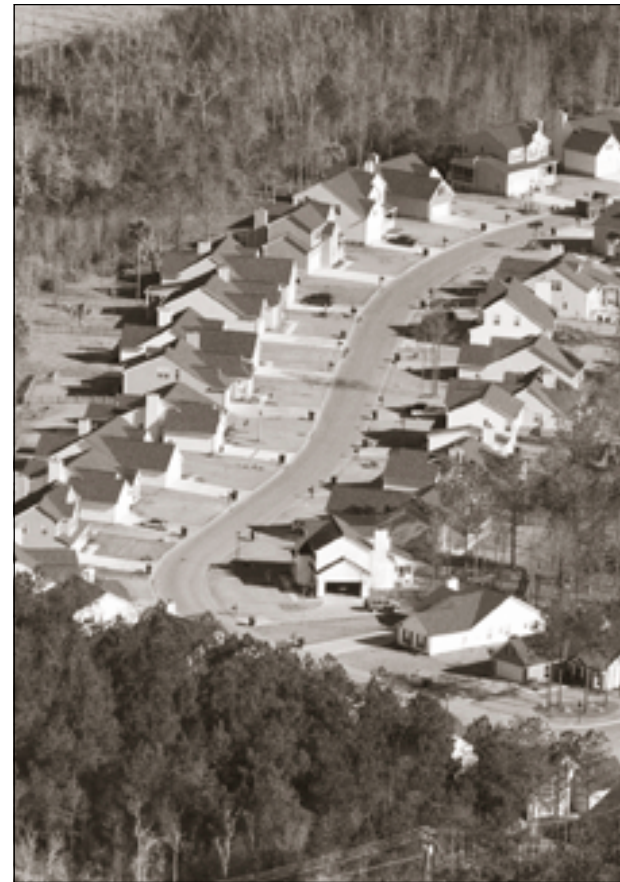
So now Charleston County is devising a new zoning code for rural areas and a new funding source for the purchase of development rights. Charleston County Council will put a half-cent sales tax on the November 2000 ballot to raise \$30 million, the proceeds paying for public transit, road construction, and purchases of farmland development rights as part of a proposed regional greenbelt.

Worried about crime and public health, city leaders sought to establish park systems as release valves. In New York City, Frederick Law Olmsted, influenced by rural cemeteries and by English public gardens, helped design Central Park with its lakes, woods, and winding paths. Over the next 50 years, nearly every major U.S. city adopted his ideas about urban beautification and built public green spaces.

In 1870, Olmsted proposed a new town form, which featured a major park at its center and corridors of development along "narrow informal elongations of the park," an idea that he called the "open town suburb." Communities should be "more park-like than town-like." About the same time, he designed Riverside, Illinois, the first large planned suburb. Riverside was built on a modified grid with gently curving streets, a marked contrast from the rigid grid of nearby Chicago. Linked by a commuter train into the city, this early railroad suburb offered extensive public green areas, including ball fields, croquet grounds, and a parkway corridor edged with shade trees for carriage rides. Olmsted once described his ideal suburb as a place combining the "ruralistic beauty of a loosely built New England village with a certain degree of the material and social advantages of a town."

Across the Atlantic, the British utopian Ebenezer Howard also lamented dirty industrialized cities. In an 1898 book, he proposed the so-called "Garden City," a place where "all the advantages of the most energetic and active town life, with all the beauty and delight of the country, may be secure in perfect combination."

Although industrial and residential areas would be separated, people could still walk to work in Howard's theoretical Garden City. The community would provide housing for a wide range of incomes, plus a town center and parkland. For its time, the Garden City was planned at a relatively low housing density to prevent overcrowding. "Howard's prime contribution was to outline the nature of a balanced community," noted author Lewis Mumford in a 1965 preface to Howard's



COOKIE CUTTER. Each year, more than 100,000 acres are converted to suburban development in South Carolina. PHOTO/WADE SPEEDS

reissued book, "and to show what steps were necessary, in an ill-organized and disoriented society, to bring it into existence."

In the United States, an influential group of intellectuals embraced many garden city ideas. Howard's followers developed several garden city towns, including Radburn, New Jersey, built in 1927. At Radburn, planners Clarence S. Stein and Henry Wright devised luxurious playgrounds and meadows faced by clustered houses—a plan reflecting the influence of the New England village green.

Stein and Wright's greatest innovation, however, was to accommodate the automobile. Stein argued that "the Radburn idea" aimed "to answer the enigma, how to live with the auto," or "how to live in spite of it." Stein and his associates created winding streets and large suburban blocks with cul-de-sacs that prevented drive-through traffic.

Radburn's planners were especially concerned about children's safety and emotional development. Funneling car



verted from open space to development in South

traffic away from play areas, they anticipated the anxieties of today's suburban parents. Above all, a distinctively American goal—the pursuit of happiness—infected the garden city reformers. “The guiding motive for the New Town planner . . . is this: he is creating a stage, a theater for the good life,” wrote Stein in his 1957 book *New Towns for America*.

Garden suburbs appeared in all parts of North America: Philadelphia, Kansas City, Miami, Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Toronto. These communities were more compact than today's sprawl and better planned, according to University of Pennsylvania professor of urbanism Witold Rybczynski in a 1995 book. Garden suburbs “were distinguished precisely by the sophistication of their layouts and the quality of

their architecture,” he pointed out.

In 1936, Gertrude Stein wrote, “In America there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is—that is what makes America what it is.” But even then, some open spaces were shrinking as suburbs spread. More than half of the new homes built between 1922 and 1929 were single-family houses, and most were in the suburbs. By the 1930s, one out of six Americans already lived in suburban communities, which were growing faster than cities. Still, most suburbs remained relatively compact, and many people walked for errands and commuted to work by railroad and streetcar.

It was not until after World War II that American suburbs really bloomed. More than anything else, it was the automobile that powered modern suburbia. Factories that had built jeeps and tanks shifted to producing cars for families thriving in the new economic boom. Middle-class Americans now enjoyed unprecedented mobility; they could live in rural areas or town edges and drive to work. As more people drove cars, cities became more spread out, which meant that more people had to drive cars . . .

At mid-century, a powerful ideal stimulated suburbanization. There was a public consensus that government should help provide single-family homes for veterans and their families, repaying them for their sacrifices. After the war, huge numbers of ex-soldiers received Veterans Administration loans to buy houses in new subdivisions built on metropolitan edges, which federally financed highways connected to city centers.

Massive public investments—including mortgage assistance, federal highway building, subsidies for suburban water and sewer projects, and extremely cheap gas—made post-war suburbia possible, according to Becker. Most of these subsidies remain today. The United States, for

example, still has the lowest gas taxes in the developed world.

Although criticized as the triumph of the bland, suburbia of the 1950s was revolutionary. For the first time in history, the majority of a nation's households could afford a single-family detached home with a yard. And while garden city planners had emphasized public open spaces, post-war developers left out neighborhood parks, which are expensive to build and maintain. Developers sold larger lots with private green areas—back yards. The private lawn for the middle-class family became a central part of the American landscape.

In this era, developers competed to build affordable neighborhoods, elegance and charm and beauty not required. The excellent plans that had distinguished garden suburbs virtually disappeared in new subdivisions. “The genius of (post-war sprawl) was its cheapness,” says Chris Schmitt, a Charleston architect. Developers, Rybczynski wrote, “quickly realized they could dispense with niceties of architectural design and urban planning without harming sales.”

In the late 1950s and 1960s, some developers and architects—another group of new-town idealists—began confronting sloppy planning and suburban ugliness. They wanted to build communities that provided elegance and privacy for families in more natural surroundings.

In 1957, developer Charles E. Fraser broke ground for a new resort in Hilton Head Island's longleaf pine forests. When Fraser started planning Sea Pines Plantation, Hilton Head was an isolated place and most of Beaufort County was impoverished. But Sea Pines' extraordinary success changed all that. “Within just a couple of generations, Beaufort County was transformed from among the poorest to one of the richest in the state, and that was primarily due to the efforts of one man—Charles Fraser,” says Lawrence Rowland, historian at the University of South Carolina-Beaufort.

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Although Fraser started Sea Pines with few precedents for environmentally sensitive new communities, he demanded that architects carefully fit buildings and other development onto the sites, protecting vegetation and tree canopies. He pushed architects to design homes that blended into the southeastern landscape, emphasizing natural materials—cedar and cypress and redwood—and earth-toned finishes. With large windows and skylights, Sea Pines homes provide views of the ocean, rivers, marshes, and golf courses. Marketed to prosperous, active retirees and vacationers, Sea Pines includes miles of walking and biking trails, numerous golf courses, and a protected wildlife area.

Before long, developers were imitating Sea Pines' architecture and landscaping. "It became the role model for all these coastal developments," says Chris Schmitt. "The people Fraser put together as a team have been a major influence on resort development around the country." Today, a large number of successful resorts and subdivisions include winding parkways, elegantly designed golf courses, and protected tree canopies. But many developers who had not worked with Fraser, Schmitt says, didn't understand the Sea Pines model. "People looked at Sea Pines from a distance and said, 'I'm going to copy that.' But they never understood Fraser's real concepts and they just ended up building hollow imitations."

Hilton Head, once considered a model of environmentally-friendly building, is out of favor with promoters of neotraditional communities, who see the island's planning as a failed experiment. At a 1991 S.C. Sea Grant Consortium conference, Andres Duany, a Miami-based architect and a prominent New Urbanist, said: "Hilton Head is a good-looking place. They saved all the oaks. And it has certain ecological pretensions. But the fact is that it's a little Los Ange-

les." The traffic, he said, "is all the people talk about." The problem, he added, is that Hilton Head was planned for the automobile and not for pedestrians or public transit.

NEW URBANISM'S SPRAWL

As they build and rebuild cities, ever-hopeful Americans keep experimenting, trying to create the ideal community. Today, the New Urbanists are earnestly promoting their development model. By resurrecting planning methods of 1900 to 1930, they say, our urban and rural landscapes can be saved.

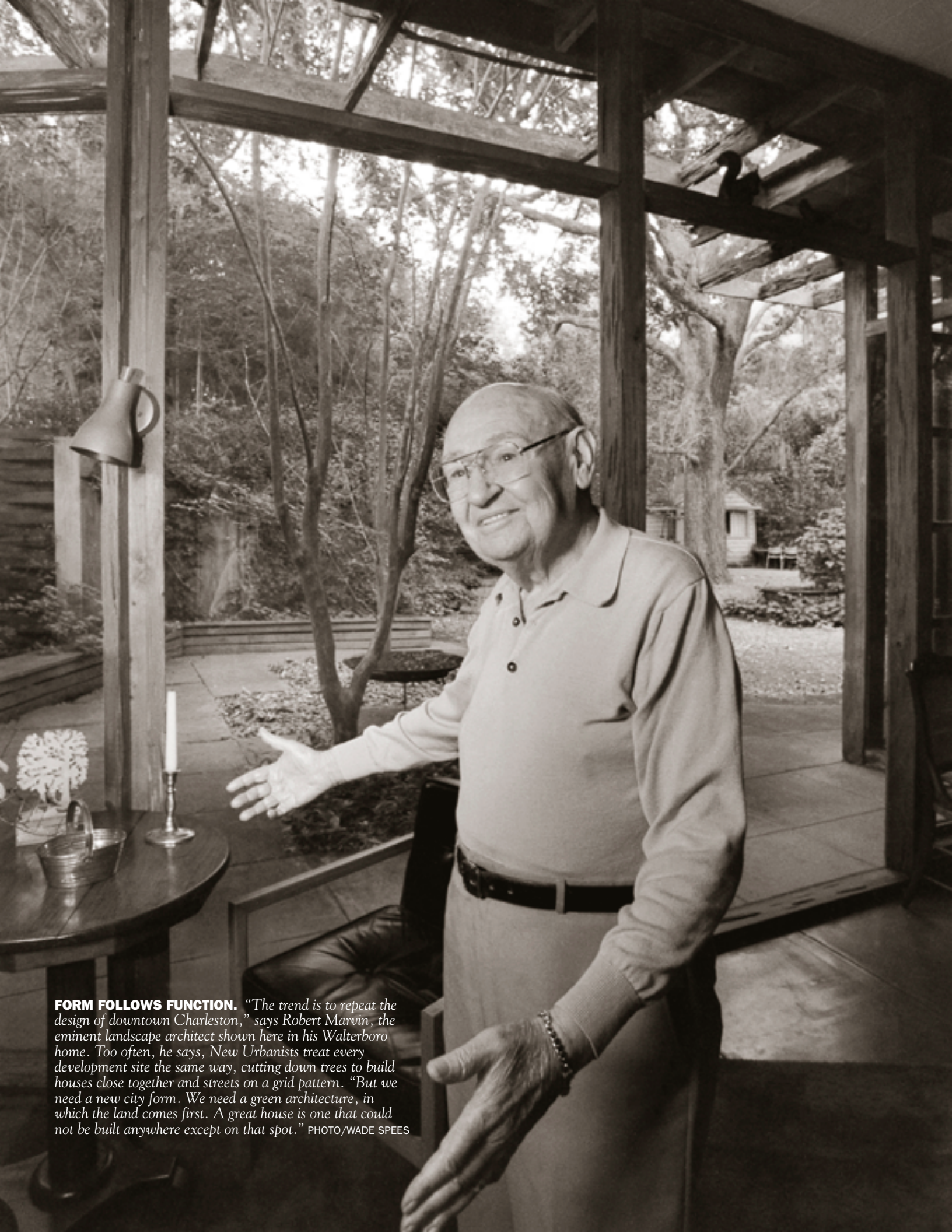
So far, however, New Urbanist projects have not greatly changed how American towns and cities are built. Nearly all neotraditional neighborhoods are constructed at metropolitan edges on raw land—just like conventional suburbs. Very few address public transit or protect significant wildlife habitat. Many have housing densities similar to those of conventional suburbs. These projects don't reduce sprawl but just perpetuate it in a slightly different form, critics say.

It's "almost impossible" to provide all the elements of New Urbanism in a new neighborhood, agrees Chris Anderson, marketing director for I'On Realty, the neighborhood's property manager. New Urbanism encourages greater transit use, but modern metro areas are built without public transit in mind, Anderson points out. The I'On neighborhood is an island, surrounded by infrastructure built on the sprawl model.

"The biggest problem with New Urbanist communities is that the urban ideal and suburban reality are in conflict," says Schmitt. "When you live in I'On, you still have to get in your car to go to work."

But if all new suburbs were built according to New Urbanist principles, could sprawl be stopped in its tracks? Americans would have to accept sacrifices

"Since the early 19th century, the country's population has grown so much that if we'd stayed in a nonsprawl condition, we'd all have to live in 30-story buildings today," says Charles Fraser.



FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION. “The trend is to repeat the design of downtown Charleston,” says Robert Marvin, the eminent landscape architect shown here in his Walterboro home. Too often, he says, New Urbanists treat every development site the same way, cutting down trees to build houses close together and streets on a grid pattern. “But we need a new city form. We need a green architecture, in which the land comes first. A great house is one that could not be built anywhere except on that spot.” PHOTO/WADE SPEEDS



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to live in an ideal New Urbanist world. Many more people would have to commute to work by public transit or bicycle or on foot. Today, only about five percent of Americans commute by public transit; even in densely populated San Francisco, less than 10 percent of commuters use mass transit. Under the New Urbanist model, people would also have to live much closer together than they do in most modern suburbs.

In a 1993 book, New Urbanist architect Peter Calthorpe argued that a “transit-oriented” community would need at least an average density of 10 housing units an acre to sustain minimal bus service and at least 15 units an acre to sustain express bus service and light rail. Small-lot, single-family detached homes usually range from seven to 10 units an acre. Residents of Calthorpe’s ideal transit-oriented town would live in a mix of single-family homes on tiny lots, townhouses, condominiums, and apartments. In South Carolina’s conventional suburbs, there are generally one to five homes for every acre.

But Calthorpe greatly underestimates the population densities required to make

public transit accessible, affordable, and efficient, says Fraser, a consultant on Disney’s Celebration development. For public transit to compete effectively with automobiles, suburbanites would have to live in multi-story apartment buildings, he argues.

In some northern European cities, new transit-oriented communities have 25 to 40 units per acre, according to a new book by Timothy Beatley, University of Virginia professor of city and environmental planning. Many residents live in two- and three-story buildings.

But that would be wildly impractical here, considering the American attachment to the automobile and single-family home and a yard, says Fraser. “If you told a homebuyer, ‘You ought to be in a third-floor apartment,’ he’d say, ‘You’re nuts, brother, you’re nuts!’”

Other aspects of the New Urbanist ideal also rely on people living in higher concentrations. Profitable corner shops within neighborhoods—another neotraditional principle—demand housing densities of about 18 units an acre, says I’On developer Vince Graham. “If you don’t have higher density, you can’t support Mom and Pop stores.”

Sprawl or traditional town: which is better for water quality?

In 1994, the Charleston Harbor Project studied how water quality would be affected by two theoretical projects—a sprawling, low-density community and a higher-density “traditional town” like downtown Charleston—at Belle Hall, a formerly undeveloped 583-acre site in Mt. Pleasant.

To examine how these two kinds of development would affect water quality, researchers used a computer model that matched identical amounts of residential, commercial, office, and industrial space in the two projects. The undeveloped land in both theoretical communities would remain in a natural state.

In the town model, residential densities were much higher than in the sprawling community; commercial and residential land uses were cheek by jowl; streets were narrower and parking lots were smaller. By using these development strategies, the town model preserved much more land in its natural state—more than 68 percent of the site compared to 8 percent of the sprawl model. As a result, the town model paved about half as much land area for streets as did the sprawling community.

Researchers found that the town model produced far less runoff pollution than the sprawl model. That’s largely because the study’s town model preserved a significant land buffer between the water and developed areas. In the sprawl model, very little land was protected as a waterway buffer.

But the traditional town had a higher urban density and higher percentage of paved surfaces within its developed area than did the sprawl model. If the town model had been built so that no land was preserved between developed areas and the water, then runoff pollution sent into the local creek would have increased significantly.

Most neotraditional developers attempt to imitate the traditional town model. So one lesson from this study is that New Urbanist communities need to preserve significant amounts of land in their natural state. In terms of protecting water quality, “neotraditional communities would be better than sprawl only if they conserve open space as a part of their overall designs,” says James Hackett, environmental planner with the S.C. Office of Coastal and Resource Management. To protect water quality, urbanized areas should be located away from waterways, with adequate buffers of open space. ♡

Nevertheless, calling for “higher density” is like waving a red flag at many suburban homebuyers, says architect Chris Schmitt. “There’s a huge segment of the home-buying public that finds higher density offensive.”

Not true, says Graham. “Density is not on the radar screen of most homebuyers.” When they see a neotraditional community, he adds, “homebuyers don’t think how dense it is, but how nice it is.”

“Vince is right on the money,” says Schmitt. “When people see a neotraditional community, it overcomes a lot of their prejudices about density.”

In any case, New Urbanism remains a hard sell for those who love their large yards and gardens. Robert Marvin, the Walterboro landscape architect who worked closely with Fraser on Sea Pines, dislikes the New Urbanist emphasis on tighter living conditions. At his home in Walterboro, Marvin looked out the huge windows at his gorgeous back-yard garden and said, “Think of what this environment does for a family’s emotional development. Higher densities have the disadvantage of not providing enough harbors to develop individuals.”

Maybe so, but we can’t go on like this, many say. Sprawl’s environmental consequences are already dire: air pollution from car exhaust, including contributions to climate change; water pollution from road runoff; and increasing losses of wildlife habitat and endangered species.

Sprawl, moreover, is expensive. Providing public services—new roads, water and sewer lines, schools—to sprawling suburbs is more costly than to higher-density communities. “The real question is,” says Becker, “who’s going to pay for future growth?” People living in outlying subdivisions are not paying the full costs of providing infrastructure there, he argues. Everybody else—

particularly those living in the denser inner cities—subsidizes growth at the metropolitan fringe.

Jim London, Clemson University professor of city and regional planning, agrees. “In South Carolina, we don’t have the money for the infrastructure we’re going to need over the next 20 years if we continue to grow the way we have been.”

Some governments have experimented with measures to discourage or stop new construction at the urban edge. Localities have acquired “greenbelts” as roadblocks to sprawling growth into the countryside. Communities such as Boulder, Colorado, have bought rural land outright. Other governments have established public-service boundaries—the so-called smart-growth option—following Maryland’s example. Perhaps the most aggressive protector of open space, Portland, Oregon, has established strict zoning boundaries around its metropolitan area. And some localities are purchasing development rights on farmland.

The idea is for government to draw a line on a map and stop development beyond that line. But there is a downside to this strategy. Before long, buildable land inside a greenbelt or growth boundary can become a rare commodity. If the supply of land remains the same, and jobs, population, and demand for housing keep rising, then the cost of a single-family home can skyrocket. Single-family home values have shot up in Boulder and Portland and other places with strict boundaries.

Many urban boundaries simply won’t last, says Becker of the Strom Thurmond Institute. Eventually, developers and real-estate interests seek to puncture the boundary with more subdivisions and malls. So he calls for a broad approach of stronger state and regional planning, higher taxes and fees on activities that lead to sprawl, and policies to promote public transit where it’s feasible. Such policies, he argues, would significantly

reduce costs of building new roads, schools, and other infrastructure; offer financial savings for households and communities; and provide opportunities to reduce automobile use.

Government, Becker says, should probably ratchet up gasoline taxes to European levels, making a gallon of gas cost four bucks. Citizens would be forced to change their behavior, turning to denser housing patterns and public transit. “We have to move in that direction” if we want to stop sprawl, Becker says.

So how would higher gas taxes fly with voters? In 1996, President Clinton retreated quickly from his proposal to increase federal gas taxes by 4.3 cents. Would Americans eagerly support a three-dollar increase?

Hardly, says Fraser. “Huge numbers of voters would slaughter any politician who raised taxes based on the theory that they should ride a bus that doesn’t exist.”

Most Americans don’t embrace tougher land-use laws, even to prevent sprawl. In the Pew Center survey, only 40 percent of Americans agreed that local governments should restrict new development at suburban edges and encourage it within already urbanized areas.

The patterns of modern growth will not be altered soon. It took decades to build today’s urban landscape, and even if every community decided to change its development patterns, it would take decades to transform the modern system. Besides, voters don’t seem terribly anxious to put brakes on “overdevelopment.” As much as they claim to dislike sprawl, many suburbanites actually value the very things that have spawned spread-out growth: spacious and quiet neighborhoods, large gardens and lawns, wide highways, and, perhaps most of all, cheap gas for their cars, which provide the mobility and freedom that Americans crave. ♡

EBBS & FLOWS

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